

Marooned Under the Sea

By Paul Ernst

(Editor's note: This document, written on a curious kind of parchment and tied to a piece of driftwood, was reported to have been picked out of the sea near the Fiji Islands. The first and last pages were so water soaked as to be indecipherable.)

Yacht *Rosa* was due to leave the San Francisco harbor in two hours.

We were going on some mysterious cruise to the South Seas, the details of which I did not know.

"Professor George Berry, the famous zoologist, and myself are going to do some exploring that is hazardous in the extreme," Stanley had said. "For purely mechanical reasons we need a third. You are young and have no family ties, so I thought I'd ask you to go with us. I'd rather not tell you what it's all about until we are on our way."

That was all the explanation he had given. It was sufficient. I was fed-up with life just then: I had enough money to avoid work and was tired of playing.

Three men stick out a strange and desperate adventure among the incredible monsters of the dark sea floor.

"I must warn you that you'll risk your life in this," he had continued, in answer to my acceptance of his invitation.

And I had replied that the hazard, whatever it might be, only made the trip appear more desirable.

So here I was, on board the yacht, about to sail for far places on some scientific mission which had so far been kept veiled in secrecy and which was represented as "hazardous in the extreme." It sounded attractive!

Stanley came aboard accompanied by a lean, wiry man with iron gray hair and cool, alert black eyes.

"Hello, Martin," Stanley greeted me. "I want you to meet Professor Berry, the real leader of this expedition. Professor, this young red-head is Martin Grey, a sort of nephew by adoption who knows more about night life than most cabaret proprietors—and not much of anything else. He has shaken the dangers of the gold-diggers to face with us the dangers of the tropic seas."

The professor gripped my hand, and his cool black eyes gazed into mine with a kind of friendly frostiness.

"Don't pay any attention to him," he advised me. "Twenty years ago, when I first met him, he was on his way to Africa to shoot elephants because some revue beauty had just thrown him over and he felt he ought to do something big and heroic about it. It was shortly afterward that he decided to stay a bachelor all his life, and became such a confirmed woman hater."

He smiled thinly at Stanley's prod in the ribs, and the two went below, talking and laughing with the intimacy of old friendship.

I stayed on deck and soon found myself watching, with no little wonder, an enormous truck and trailer arrangement that drew up on the dock heavily loaded with a single immense crate. It was for us. I speculated as to what it could possibly contain.

It was a twenty or twenty-five-foot cube solidly braced with strap-iron and steel brackets. It evidently contained something fragile. The yacht's donkey engine lowered a hook for it, and swung it over the side and into the hold as daintily as though it had been packed with explosives.

The last of the ship's stores followed it over the side: the group of newspaper reporters who had been trying to pump the captain and first mate for a story were warned to leave, and we were ready to go. Precisely where and for what purpose?

I was to find out almost immediately.

Even as the yacht nosed superciliously away from the dock, the steward approached me with the information that lunch was ready. I went to the small, compactly furnished dining salon, where I was joined by Stanley and the professor.

There were only the three of us at the table. Stanley Browne, noted big game hunter and semi-retired owner of the great Browne Glassworks at Altoona, a man fifteen years my senior but tanned and fit looking; Professor Berry, well known in scientific circles; and myself, known in no branch of activity save the one Stanley had jested about—the night life of my home city, Chicago.

"It's time you knew just what you're up against," said Stanley to me after the consomme had been served. "Now that we've actually sailed, there's no longer any need for secrecy. Indeed there never has been urgent need of it: the Professor and myself merely thought we might provoke incredulity and comment if we stated the purpose of

our trip publicly."

He buttered a roll.

"We—the Professor and you and I—are going in for some deep sea diving. And when I say deep, I mean deep. We are going to investigate conditions as they exist one mile down from the surface of the ocean."

"A mile!" I exclaimed. "Why—"

There I stopped. I had only a layman's knowledge of such matters. But I knew that the limit of man's submersion, till then at any rate, was a matter of a few hundred feet.

"Sounds incredible, doesn't it," said Stanley with a smile. "But that's what we're going to do—if the Professor's gadget works as he seems to think it will."

"I don't think it, I know it," retorted the Professor. "And man, man, the things we may see down there! New and unknown species—a world no human has ever seen before—perhaps the secret of all of life—"

"Dragons, sea-serpents, and what not!" Stanley finished with a grin.

"Or, possibly—nothing at all." The Professor shrugged. "I mustn't let my scientific curiosity run away with me. Perhaps we'll find no new thing down down. Our deep sea dredging and classification may already embrace most of the forms of life in the greater depths."

"If it does I want my money back," said Stanley. "When you asked me to finance this expedition for you, I agreed on condition that you would show me a thrill—some *real* big game, even if I would not be able to shoot it. If we draw blank—"

"The mere descent should satisfy you, my adventuring friend," replied the Professor brusquely. "I think you'll find that thrilling enough."

"But—a mile under the surface!" I marveled, feeling not entirely comfortable. "The pressure! Enormous! It can't be done! That is, I mean, can it be done?"

"It had better be," said Stanley with a humor that I did not entirely appreciate. "If it isn't, the three of us are going to be pressed out like three sheets of tissue paper! For we are assuredly going down that far in the Professor's gadget."

"Was that the thing I saw hoisted aboard just before we left?"

"That was it. We'll stroll around after lunch and look it over."

If I had taken this cruise in search of distraction—I was surely going to be successful! That was plain!

"Just where are we going?" I asked. "You said something about the South Seas, but you've named no special part of them."

"We're bound for Penguin Deep. That's a delightful little dimple in the Kermadec Trough, which," Stanley explained, "is north-northeast of New Zealand almost halfway up to the Fiji Islands. Penguin Deep is ticketed at five thousand one hundred and fifty feet, but it probably runs deeper in spots."

The rest of the meal was consumed in silence. I hardly tasted what I ate; I remember that. Over five thousand feet down—where no man had ever ventured before! Could we make it?

I tried to recall my neglected physics lessons and compute the pressure that far down. I couldn't. But I knew it must be an appalling total of tons to the square inch. What possible arrangement could they have brought in which to make that awful descent?

And, if the descent were accomplished, what in the world would we

see when we got down there? Gigantic, hitherto unknown fishes? Marine growths, half animal and half vegetable?

Decidedly, hot rolls and salad, cutlets and baked potatoes, good as they were, could not distract attention from the crowding questions that assailed me. And I could see that Stanley and the Professor were also far away in their thoughts—probably already exploring Penguin Deep.

After lunch we went forward to look at the Professor's gadget, as Stanley insisted on calling it.

It had been carefully unpacked by the crew while we ate, and it shimmered in the electric lighted hold like a great bubble.

It was a giant glass sphere, polished and flawless. Inside it could be made out various objects—a circular bench arrangement on a wooden flooring, batteries that filled the cup between the floor and the bottom arc of the sphere, tall metal cylinders, a small searchlight set next to a mechanism that was indeterminate. At three equidistant points on the sides there were glass handles, as thick as a man's thigh, cast integral with the walls. On the top there was a smaller handle.

At first glance the sphere seemed all in one piece, with the central objects cast inside like a toy ship in a sealed bottle. Then a mathematically precise ring of prismatic reflections showed me that the top third of the ball was a separate piece, fitting conically down like the tapered glass stopper of a monstrous perfume bottle. The handle on the top was for the purpose of lifting this giant's teapot lid, and allowing entrance into the sphere.

"Isn't it a beauty?" murmured Stanley. "It ought to be," he added. "It cost me eighty-six thousand to make it in my own glass factory. Eleven castings before this one came along that was reasonably free of flaws. Twenty-two feet six inches over all, walls five feet thick, new formula unbreakable glass, four men working a month to grind the lid into place, tolerance limits plus or minus zero."

He slapped the Professor's shoulders. "Let's go in and look over the apparatus."

To accommodate the huge ball a well had been constructed in the Rosa's hold. This brought the deck we were standing on up to within six feet of the top ring, above which was rigged a chain hoist for lifting the ponderous lid.

The hoist was revolved, the conical top was swung free, and we

clambered into our unique diving shell.

The tall cylinders were revealed as great flasks of compressed air. The indeterminate thing beside the searchlight turned out to be a hand pump, geared to work against heavy pressure. From the suction chamber of this three tubes extended.

"We inhale the air of the chamber," the Professor explained to me, "and exhale through the tubes into the pump cylinder. Breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. The pump piston is forced down by this geared handle, sending the used air out of the shell through this sixteenth-inch hole. A ball check valve keeps the water from squirting in when the exhaust pressure is released."

He pointed to a telegraphic key which completed a circuit from the batteries in the bottom of the ball to a thread of copper cast through the lid.

"That's your plaything, Martin. You are to raise or lower us by pressing that key. It controls the donkey engine electrically, so that we guide our own destinies though we are a mile beneath our power plant. Stanley works the pump. I direct the searchlight, write down notes, and, I sincerely hope, take snapshots of deep sea life."

For a moment my part of the labor seemed so easy as to be unfair. Merely to sit there and punch a little key at raising and lowering time! But as I thought it over it began to appear more difficult.

The *Rosa* could not anchor, of course, in a mile of water. We would drift helplessly. If we approached an undersea cliff I must raise us at once to prevent us being smashed against it. And if the cliff were too lofty to be cleared in time....

I mentioned this to the Professor.

"That would be unfortunate," he said, with his frosty smile. "Stanley assures us this glass is unbreakable. He means commercially unbreakable. What would happen to it if it were submitted to the strain of being flung against a rock pile—in addition to the enormous stress of the water pressure—I don't know. It's your job to see that we don't have to find out!"

It had been planned to test the sphere empty first to see how it stood the strain.

We drifted to a full stop over the center of Penguin Deep where we were to gamble our lives in a game with Neptune. Sea anchors were rigged to lessen our drift and the donkey engine was geared to the

first cable drum.

There was an impressive row of these drums, each holding an interminable length of three-quarter-inch cable. The bulk of a mile of steel cable has to be seen to be believed!

The glass sphere was lifted from the hold, delicately for all its enormous weight, and swung over the rail preparatory to being lowered into the depths.

Not until that moment did I notice two things: that there was no fastening of any kind to keep the thick lid in place: and that the three-quarter-inch cable looked like a pack thread in comparison to the ponderous bulk it strained to support.

"We couldn't use a heavier cable," said the Professor, "because of the strain. We're overloading the hoist as it is. As for the lid being fastened down—I think you'll find it will be pressed into place securely enough!"

There was unanimous silence as the great globe slipped into the sea—down and down until the last reflection of the morning sun ceased to shimmer from its surface. Drum after drum was played out, till the first mate held his hand up to check the engineer.

"Five thousand feet, sir," he called to Stanley.

"Haul it back up. And let us hope," Stanley added fervently, "that we'll find the gadget in one piece."

The engine began to snort rhythmically. Dripping, vibrating, the coils of cable began to crawl back in place on the drums. There was a glint under the surface again as the sunlight reflected on the nearing sphere.

The great ball flashed out of the water, and a cheer burst from the throats of all of us. It was absolutely unharmed. Only—there was a beading of fine moisture inside the thick globe. What that could mean, none of us could figure out.

"Difference in temperature?" worried the Professor. "No, it's as cold inside as out. Molecules of water driven by sheer pressure through five feet of glass to unite in drops on the inside? Possibly. Well, there's one way to find out. Stanley, Martin—are you ready?"

We nodded, and prepared to visit the bottom a mile below the *Rosa's* keel. The preparation consisted merely in donning heavy, fleece-lined jumpers to protect us from the cold of the sunless depths.

Soberly we entered the ball to undergo whatever ordeal awaited us on the distant ocean floor. How comparative distance is! A mile walk in the country—it is nothing. A mile ascent in an airplane—a trifle. But a mile descent into pitch black, bone chilling depths of water—that is an immense distance!

Copper wire, on a separate drum, was connected from the engine switch to the copper thread that curled through the glass wall to my telegraphic key. We strapped the mouthpieces of the breathing tubes over our heads, and Browne started the slow turning of the compression pump.

The Professor snapped the searchlight on and off several times to see that it was in working shape. He raised his hand, I pressed the key, and the long descent began.

That plunge into the bottomless depths remains in my memory almost as clearly as the far more fantastic adventures that came to us later.

Smoothly, rapidly, the yellow-green of the surface water dimmed to olive. This in turn grew blacker and blacker. Then we were slipping down into pitch darkness—a big bubble lit by a meagre lamp and containing three fragile human beings that dared to trust the soft pulp

of their bodies to the crushing weight of the deepest ocean.

The most impressive thing was the utter soundlessness of our descent. At first there had been a pulsing throb of the donkey engine transmitted to us by the sustaining cable. This died as we slid farther from the Rosa. At length it was hushed entirely, cushioned by the springy length of steel. There was no stir, no sound of any kind. As far as our senses could tell us, we were hanging motionless in the pressing, awesome blackness.

The Professor switched off our light and turned on the searchlight which he trained downward through the wall at as steep an angle as the flooring would permit. Even then the illusion of motionlessness was preserved. There was nothing in the water to mark our progress. We might have been floating in a back void of space.

Down and down we went, for an interminable length of time—till at length we reached the abysmal level where the sun never shone and the eyes of man had never gazed till now.

Words were made to describe familiar articles. I find now when I am faced with the necessity of portraying events and objects beyond the range of normal human experience that I cannot conjure up words to fit. I despair of trying to make you see what we saw, and feel what

we felt.

But try to picture yourself in the glass ball with us:

All is profound blackness save for a streak of white, dying about fifty feet away, which is the beam of our searchlight. Twenty feet below is a bare floor of flinty lava and broken shell. This is unrelieved by sea-weed of any kind, appearing like an imagined fragment of Martian or lunar landscape.

The ball sways idly to the push of some explicable submarine current. It is like being in a captive balloon, except that the connecting cable extends stiffly upward instead of downward.

There is a realization, an instinctive *feel* of awful pressure around you. Logic tells you how you are clamped about, but deeper than logic is the intuition that the glass walls are pressing in on themselves—at the point of collapse. Your ears, tingle with the feel of it: your head rings with it.

You are breathing in through your nose—thin, unsatisfying gulps of air that cause your lungs to labor at their task; and you are exhaling through, your mouth, with difficulty, into the barrel of the powerful pump. No bubbles arise from the tiny hole where the used air is

forced into the water. The pressure is too enormous for that. Only a thin, milky line marks its escape from the sphere.

In a ghostly way you see Stanley turning the pump handle. With a handful of waste which he has borrowed from the *Rosa's* engine room, the Professor wipes from the section of wall through which the searchlight plays the moisture that constantly collects there. I sit with my hand near the key, peering downward and ahead like an engineer in a locomotive cab, ready to raise the shell or lower it as occasion warrants.

And always the suffocating awareness of pressure....

Strange and mystic journey as the tortured glass sphere floated over the bottom, following the slow drift of the *Rosa* far above!

The finger of light played along the tilted side of a wrecked tramp steamer. There was a crumpled gash in the bow. From this ragged hole suddenly appeared a great, serpentine form....

The Professor clutched at his camera, pointed it, and clenched his hands in a frenzy of disappointment. The serpent shape had disappeared back into the hull. A little later and we had drifted slowly past the wreck.

"Damn it!" the Professor snatched away his mouthpiece to exclaim:
"If we could only *stop*."

The bottom changed character shortly after we had passed the hulk.
We began to creep over low, gently rounded mounds.

These were so regular in form that they were puzzling. About fifty feet across and ten in altitude, they looked artificial in their symmetry—like great saucers set on the ocean floor bottom side up. They took on a dirty black hue as our light struck them, and glowed with a faint phosphorescence as they stretched away into the darkness.

A twelve-foot monstrosity, all toad-like head and eyes, swam into the light beam and bumped blindly against the glass ball. For an instant it goggled crazily at us. The Professor took its picture. It blundered away. As it reached the darkness beyond the beam it, too, showed phosphorescent. A belt of blue-white spots like the portholes of a liner extended down its ugly sides.

Along the bottom, between the curious mounds, writhed a wormlike thing. But it was too huge to be described as truly wormlike—it was eighteen or twenty feet long and a foot thick. It was blood red, almost blunt ended and patently without eyes.

I took my gaze off it for an instant. When I looked again it had disappeared. I blinked at this seeming miracle and then discovered a foot or so of its tail protruding from under the edge of one of the mounds. It was threshing furiously about.

It was at this instant that I suddenly found increased difficulty, and glanced at Stanley.

He had stopped pumping and was clutching at the Professor's arm with one hand while he pointed down with the other. The Professor motioned him toward the pump, and began to click pictures furiously with the camera pointed at the nearest mound.

Wondering at the urgency of Stanley's gesture and the frantic clicking of the camera shutter, I looked more closely at the curious, saucerlike hump.

Under closer inspection something remarkably like a huge, mud-colored eye was revealed! And as we drifted along, twenty feet away on the farther slope, another appeared!

Paralyzed, I stared at the edges of the thing. They were waving almost imperceptibly up and down, *creeping*!

The mounds were living creatures! Acres and acres of them lying lethargically on the bottom waiting for something to crawl within range of their monstrous edges!

Involuntarily I pressed the key to raise us. But we had gone only a few feet when the Professor called to me.

"Down again, Martin. I don't think these things will bother us unless we scrape against them. Anyway they can't hurt the shell."

I lowered the ball to our former twenty-foot level, and there we swung just over the monsters' backs.

The Professor had said that the giant inverted saucers would probably not bother us if we did not come in contact with them. It soon became apparent that, in a measure, he was right. The creatures either could not or would not lift their enormous bulks from the sea floor.

A gigantic wriggling thing, all grotesque fringe and tentacles, drifted down into the range of our light. Lower it floated until it hovered just above one of the larger mounds. The Professor got its portrait. At the same instant, as though it had heard the click of the shutter and been frightened by it, the thing dropped another foot—and

touched the sloping back.

With the speed of light the inverted saucer became a cup. Like a clenching fist, the cup closed over one of the straggling tentacles.

There followed a tug of war that was all the more ghastly for its soundlessness. The hunted jerked spasmodically to get away from the hunter. So wild were its efforts that several times it raised the monster clear of the bottom for a foot or so. But the grim clutch could not be broken.

Closer and closer it was dragged. Then, after a supreme paroxysm, the tentacle parted and the prey escaped. The tentacle disappeared into the mass of the baffled hunter. It made no attempt to follow the fleeing creature. It slowly relaxed along the bottom and waited for its next meal.

The unearthly incident gave us fresh confidence, convincing us that the monsters did not move unless they were directly touched. Of course we could not foresee the fatal accident that was going to put us within reach of one of the giant saucers.

We thought for awhile that these great blobs of cold life were the largest creatures of the depths. It was soon made clear to us how

mistaken that notion was!

For a time we gazed spellbound at the nightmare assortment of grotesqueries that gradually assembled around us, attracted no doubt by our light. The things were mainly sightless and of indescribable shape. Most of them were phosphorescent, and they avoided collisions in a way that suggested that they had some buried sense of light perception.

As time passed the Professor emptied his camera, refilled it several times and groaned that he had no more film. Twice as we drifted along I raised us to keep us clear of a gradual upward slope of the smooth floor.

Stanley removed his mouthpiece long enough to suggest that we go back to the surface: we had been submerged for nearly four hours now. But before we could reply a violent movement was felt.

The ball rocked and twirled so that we were forced to cling to the circular bench to avoid being thrown to the floor. It was as though a hurricane of wind had suddenly penetrated the unruffled depths.

"Earthquake?" called Stanley.

"Don't know," answered the Professor. He swung the searchlight in an arc and focussed it at length on something that appeared only as a field of blurred movement. He wiped the moisture from the wall before the lens, and there was revealed to us a sight that makes my heart pound even now when I recall it to memory.

Something vast and serpentine had ventured too near the bottom—and had been caught by the death traps there!

The creature was a writhing mass of gigantic coils. It was impossible even to guess at its length, but its girth was such that the mound-shaped monsters that had fastened to it could not entirely encircle it.

There it twined and knotted: a mighty serpent of the deepest ocean, snapping its awful length and threshing its powerful tail in an effort to dislodge the giant leeches that were flattened against it. And every time it touched the bottom in its blind frenzy, more of the teeming deathtraps attached themselves to it, crawling over their fellows in an effort to find unoccupied areas.

Soon the sea-serpent was a distorted, creeping mass. For one appalling instant its head came into our view....

It resembled the head of a crocodile, only it was ten times larger and

covered with scale like the armor plate of a destroyer. The jaws, wide open and slashing with enormous, needle-shaped teeth at the huge parasites, were large enough to have held our glass sphere. One eye appeared. It was at least three feet across and of a shimmering amethyst color.

One of the deadly saucers wrapped itself around the great head. The entire mass of attackers and attacked settled slowly to the bottom.

But before it completely succumbed the beaten monster gave one last, convulsive flick of its tail....

"Good God!" cried Stanley, shrinking away from the pump and staring upward.

I followed his gaze with my own eyes.

In the faint reflected glow of the searchlight I could see row on row of large cups flattened against the top of the ball. As I watched these flattened still more and the big sphere quivered perceptibly.

In its death struggle the mighty serpent had flicked one of the huge leeches against us. It now clung there with blind tenacity, covering nearly two-thirds of our shell with the underside of its body.

I reached for the control key to send us to the surface.

"Don't!" snapped the Professor. "The weight—"

He needed to say no more. My hand recoiled as though the key had been red hot.

The three-quarter-inch cable above us was now sustaining, in addition to its own huge weight, our massive glass ball and the appalling tonnage of this grim blanket of flesh that encircled us. Could it further hold against the strain of lifting that combined tonnage through the press of the water? Almost certainly it could not!

There was nothing we could do but hang there and discover at first hand exactly what happened to things that were clamped in those mighty, living vises!

The Professor turned on the interior bulb. The result was ghastly. It showed every detail of the belly of the thing that gripped us.

Crowded over its entire under surface were gristly, flattened suckers. Now and then a convulsive ripple ran through its surface tissue and great ridges of flesh stood out. With each squeeze the glass shell

quivered ominously as though the extreme limit of its pressure resisting power were being reached—and passed.

"A nice fix," remarked the Professor, his calm, dry voice acting like a tonic in that moment of fear. "If we try to go up, the cable would probably break. If we try to outlast the patience of this thing we might run out of air, or actually be staved in."

He paused thoughtfully.

"I suggest, though, that we follow the latter course for awhile at least. It would be just too bad if that cable broke, gentlemen!"

Stanley shuddered, and looked at the dirty white belly that pressed against the glass walls on all sides.

"I vote we stay here for a time."

"And I," was my addition.

I relieved Stanley at the pump. He and the Professor sat down on the bench. Casting frequent glances at the constricted blanket of flesh that covered us, we prepared to wait as composedly as we might for the thing to give up its effort to smash our shell.

The hour that followed was longer than any full day I have ever lived through. Had I not confirmed the passage of time by looking at my watch, I would have sworn that at least twenty hours had passed.

Every half-minute I gazed at that weaving pattern of cup-shaped suckers only five feet away, trying to see if they were relaxing in their pressure. I attempted to persuade myself that they were. But I knew I was only imagining it. Actually they were pressed as flat as ever, and the sphere still quivered at regular intervals as the heavy body squeezed in on itself. There was no sign that its blind, mindless patience was becoming exhausted.

There was little conversation during that interminable hour.

Stanley grinned wryly once and commented on the creature's disappointment if it actually succeeded in getting at us.

"We'd be scattered all over the surrounding half mile by the pressure of the water," he said. "There'd be nothing left for our pet to feed on but five-foot chunks of broken glass. Not a very satisfying meal."

"We might try to reason with the thing—point out how foolish it is to waste its time on us," I suggested, trying to appear as nonchalant as he was.

The Professor said nothing. He was coolly writing in his notebook, describing minutely the appearance of our abysmal captor.

Finally I chanced to look down through a section of wall not covered by our stubborn enemy. I wiped the moisture from the glass before the searchlight so that I could see more clearly.

The bottom seemed to be heaving up and down. I blinked my eyes and looked again. It was not an illusion. With a regular dip and rise we were approaching to within a few feet of the rocky floor and moving back up again. Also we were floating faster than at anytime previous. The bottom was bare again; we had left the crowding, ominous mounds.

I waved to the Professor. He snapped his notebook shut and stared at the uneasy ocean bottom.

"I've been hoping I was wrong," he said simply. "I thought I felt a wavy motion fifteen minutes ago, and it seemed to me to increase steadily."

The three of us stared at each other.

"You mean ..." began Stanley with a shudder.

"I mean that the *Rosa*, one mile above us, is having difficulties. A storm. Judging from our movement it must be a hurricane: the length of cable would cushion us from any average wave, and we are rising and falling at least fifteen feet."

"My God!" groaned Stanley. "The *Rosa* is already heeled with the weight of us. She could never weather a hurricane!"

The plight of the crew above our heads was as clear to us as though we had been aboard with them.

Should they cut the cable, figuring that the lives of the three of us were certainly not to be set against the thirty on the yacht?

Should they disconnect the electric control and try to haul us up regardless?

Or should they try to ride out the storm in spite of being crippled by the drag of us?

"I think if I were up there I'd cut us adrift," said Stanley grimly. Both the Professor and myself nodded. "Though," he added hopefully, "my captain is a good gambler...."

The cable quivered like a live thing under the terrific strain. At each

downward swoop, before the upswing began, there was a sickening sag.

"We no longer have a decision to make," said the Professor. "Press the key, Martin, and God grant we can rise with all this dead weight."

And at that instant the crew of the *Rosa* were also relieved of the necessity for making a decision.

At the bottom of one of those long, sickening falls there was a jerk—and we continued on down to the ocean floor!

The sphere rolled over, jumbling the equipment in a tangled mess with the three of us in the center, bruised and cut. The light snapped off as the battery connections were torn loose.

There we lay at the bottom of Penguin Deep, in an inert sphere that was dead and dark in the surrounding blackness—a coffin of glass to hold us through the centuries....

"Martin," I heard the Professor's voice after a time. "Stanley—can either of you move? I'm caught."

"I'm caught, too," came Stanley's gasping answer. "Something on my

leg—feels like it's broken."

A heavy object was pressing across my body. With an effort I freed myself and fumbled in the pitch darkness for the other two.

"Lights first," commanded the Professor. "The pump, you know."

I did know! Frantically I scrambled in the dark till I located the batteries. They were right side up and still wired together.

The air grew rapidly foul with no one at the pump. Panting for breath I blundered at the task of connecting the light. After what seemed an eternity I accomplished it.

The light revealed Stanley with an air tank lying across his leg. The mouthpiece of his breathing tube had been forced back over his head, gashing his face in its journey. His face was white with pain.

The Professor was caught under the heavy bench. I freed him and together we attended to Stanley, finding that his leg wasn't broken but only badly bruised.

The mound-shaped monster, dislodged possibly by the fall, was nowhere to be seen.

I resumed work at the pump, the connections of which were so strongly contrived that they had withstood the shock of the upset.

For a moment we were content to rest while the air grew purer. Then we were forced squarely to face our fate.

The Professor summed up the facts in a few concise words.

"We're certainly doomed! Here at the bottom of Penguin Deep we're as out of reach of help as though we were stranded on the moon. We're as good as dead right now."

"If we have nothing left to hope for," whispered Stanley after a time, "we might as well close the air valves and get it over with at once. No use torturing ourselves...."

The Professor moistened his lips.

"It might be wise." He turned to me. "What's your opinion, Martin?"

But I—I confess I had not the stark courage of these two.

"No! No!" I cried out. "Let's keep on living as long as the air holds out. Something might happen—"

I avoided their eyes as I said it, utterly ashamed of my cowardly quibbling with death. What in the name of God could possibly happen to help us?

The Professor shrugged dully, and nodded.

"I feel with Stanley that we ought to get it over in one short stab. But we have no right to force you...." His voice trailed off.

We readjusted our mouthpieces. I turned automatically at the pump; and we silently awaited the last suffocating moment of our final doom.

As before, attracted by the light, a strange assortment of deep-sea life wriggled and darted about us, swimming lazily among the looped coils and twists of our cable which had settled down around us.

Among these were certain fish that resembled great porcupines. Spines a foot and a half long, like living knife blades, protected them from the attacks of other species.

They were the only things we saw that were not constantly writhing away from the jaws of some hostile monster—the only things that

seemed able to swim about their own affairs without even deigning to watch for danger.

Fascinated, I watched the six-foot creatures. Here were we, reasoning humans, supposed lords of creation, slowly but surely perishing—while only a few feet away one of the lowest forms of life could exist in perfect safety and tranquility!

Then, as I watched them, I seemed to see a difference in some of them.

The majority of them had two fins just behind the gill slits, typical fish tails and blunt, sloping heads. But now and then I saw a spined monster that was queerly unlike its fellows.

Instead of two front fins, these unique ones had two vacant round holes. The head looked as though it had forgotten to grow; its place was taken by an eyeless, projecting, shield shaped cap. And there was no tail.

Glad to find something to distract my half crazed thoughts, I studied the nearest of these.

They moved slower than their tailed and finned brothers, I noticed. I

wondered how they could move at all, lacking in any kind of motive power as they seemed to be.

Next instant the secret of their movement was made clear!

Out of the empty fin holes of the creature I was studying crept two long, powerful looking tentacles. But these were not true tentacles. There were no vacuum discs on them, and they moved as though supported by jointed bones—like arms.

The arms ended in flat paddles that resembled hands. These threshed the water in a sort of breast-stroke, propelling the body forward.

Shortly after the arms had appeared, the spiny head cap was cautiously extended a few inches forward from the main shell. Further it was extended as the head of a turtle might slowly appear from the protection of its bony case. And under it—

"Professor!" I screamed wildly. "My God! Look!"

Both the Professor and Stanley merely stared dully at me. I babbled of what I had seen.

"A man! A human looking thing, anyway! Arms and a head! A man inside a fish's spined hide—like armor!"

They looked pityingly at me. The Professor laid his hand on my shoulder.

"Now, now," he soothed, "don't go to pieces—"

"I tell you I saw it!" I shouted. Then, shrinking from the hysterical loudness of my own voice, I lowered my tone. "Something that looks human has occupied some of those prickly, six-foot shells. I saw arms—and a man's head! I swear it!"

"Nonsense! How could a human being stand the cold, the pressure —"

Here I happened to glance at the wall of the shell through which the searchlight shone.

"Look! See for yourself!"

Squarely in the rays of the light showed a head, projecting from one of the shells and capped with a wide flat helmet of horned bone.

There were eyes and nose and mouth placed on one side of that head—a face! There were even tabs of flesh or bony protuberances that resembled ears.

"Curious," muttered the Professor, staring. "It certainly looks human enough to talk. But it's only a fish, nevertheless. See—in the throat are gill slits."

"But the eyes! Look at them! They're not the eyes of a fish!"

And they were not. There was in them a light of reason, of intelligence. Those eyes were roaming brightly over us, observing the light, the equipment, seeming to note our amazement as we crowded to look at it.

The sphere rocked slightly. Behind the staring, manlike visitor there was a glimpse of enormous, crocodile jaws and huge, amethyst eyes. Instantly the head and arms receded, leaving an empty-seeming, lifeless shell. An impregnable fortress of spines, the thing drifted slowly away through the twisted loops of cable.

"It certainly looked like—" began Stanley shakily.

"The creature was just a fish," said the Professor shaking his head at the light in Stanley's eyes. "Some sort of giant parasite that inhabits the shells of other fish."

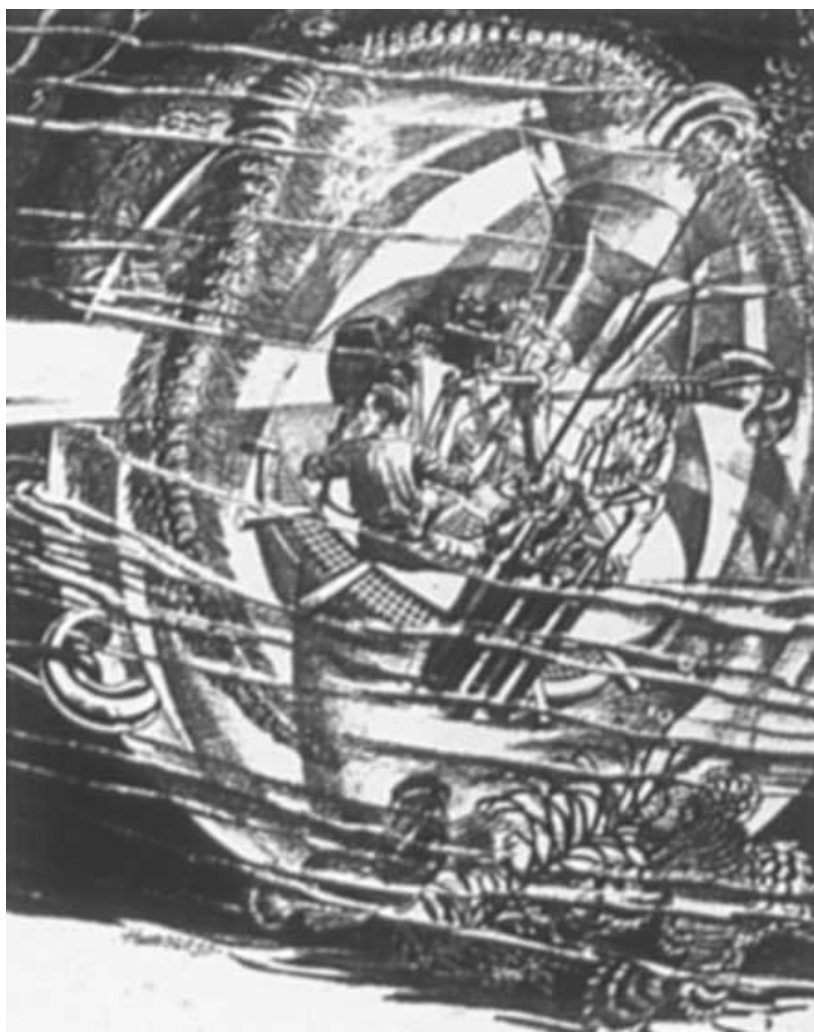
He opened the valve of the last air cylinder and seated himself

resignedly on the bench.

"We have another half hour or so—"

All of us suddenly put out our hands to brace ourselves. The sphere had moved.

"Look at the cable!" called Stanley.



[ID: A black and white illustration of the glass sphere and its passengers, tilting violently to the side. End ID.]

We did so. It was moving, writhing away from us over the bottom as though abruptly given life of its own. Coil after coil disappeared into the further gloom.

At length the cable was straight. The ball moved again—was dragged a few feet along the rocky floor.

Something—possessed of incredibly vast power—had seized the end of the steel cable and was reeling us in as a fisherman reels in a trout!

Slowly, unsteadily, we slid along the ocean floor. Ahead of us appeared a jagged black wall—a cliff. There was a gloomy hole at its base. Toward this we were being dragged by whatever it was that had caught the end of the cable.

Helpless, we watched ourselves engulfed by the murky den. In the beam of the searchlight we saw that the submarine cavern extended on and on for an unguessable depth. The cable, taut with the strain, stretched ahead out of sight.

Time had been lost track of during that mysterious, ominous journey. It was recalled to us by the state of the air we were breathing.

The Professor removed his mouthpiece and cast the tube aside.

"You might as well stop pumping, Martin," he said quietly. "We're done. There's no more air in the flask."

We stared at each other. Then we shook hands, solemnly, tremulously, taking leave of each other before we departed on that longest of all journeys....

The air in that small space was rapidly exhausted. We lay on the floor, laboring for breath, and closed our eyes....

The Professor, the oldest of the three of us, succumbed first. I heard his breath whistle stertorously and, glancing at him, saw that he was in a coma. In a moment Stanley had joined him in blessed unconsciousness.

I could feel myself drifting off.... Hammers beat at my ears.... Daggers pierced my heaving lungs....

Hazily I could see scores of the bristly, manlike fish when I opened my eyes and glanced through the walls. It was not one monster then, but many that had brought us to their lair. Abruptly, as though a signal had been given, they all streamed back toward the mouth of

the cavern....

My eyesight dimmed.... The hammers pulsed louder.... A veil descended over my senses and I knew no more....

A soft sustained roar came to my ears. Through my closed eyelids I could sense light. A dank, fishy smell came to my nostrils.

I groaned and moved feebly, finding that I was resting on something soft and pleasant.

Dazedly I opened my eyes and sat up. An exclamation burst from me as I suddenly remembered what had gone before, and realized that somehow, incredibly, I was still living.

Feeling like a man who has waked from a nightmarish sleep to find himself in his tomb, I gazed about.

I was in a long, lofty rock chamber, the uneven floor of which was covered with shallow pools of water. The further end was of smooth-grained stone that resembled cement. The near end was rough like the walls; but in it there was a small, symmetrical arch, the mouth of a passage leading away to some other point in the bowels of the earth.

The place was flooded with clear light that had a rosy tinge. From my position on the floor I could not see what made the light. It streamed from a crevice that extended clear around the cave parallel with the floor and about twelve feet above it. From this groove, along with the light, came the soft roaring hiss.

Beside me was the glass ball, the cover off and lying a few feet away from the opening in the top. There was no trace of Stanley or the Professor.

I rose from my couch, a thick, mattresslike affair of soft, pliant hide, and walked feebly toward the small arch in the near end of the cave.

Even as I approached it I heard footsteps, and voices resounded in some slurring, musical language. Half a dozen figures suddenly came into view.

They were men, as human as myself! Indeed, as I gazed at them, I felt inclined to think they were even more human!

They were magnificent specimens. The smallest could not have been less than six feet three, and all of them were muscular and finely proportioned. Their faces were arresting in their expression of calm strength and kindliness. They looked like gods, arrayed in soft, thick,

beautifully tanned hides in this rosy tinted hole a mile below the ocean's top.

They stared at me for an instant, then advanced toward me. My face must have reflected alarm, for the tallest of them held up his hand, palm outward, in a peaceful gesture.

The leader spoke to me. Of course the slurred, melodious syllable meant nothing to me. He smiled and indicated that I was to follow him. I did so, hardly aware of what I was doing, my brain reeling in an attempt to grasp the situation.

How marvelous, how utterly incredible, to find human beings here! How many were there? Where had they come from? How had they salvaged us from Penguin Deep? I gave it up, striding along with my towering guards like a man walking in his sleep.

At length the low passageway ended, and I exclaimed aloud at what I saw.

I was looking down a long avenue of buildings, all three stories in height. There were large door and window apertures, but no doors nor window panes. In front of each house was a small square with—wonder of wonders!—a lawn of whitish yellow vegetation that

resembled grass. In some of the lawns were set artistic fountains of carved rock.

I might have been looking down any prosperous earthly subdivision, save for the fact that the roofs of the houses were the earth itself, which the building walls, in addition to functioning as partitions, served to support. Also earthly subdivisions aren't usually illuminated with rosy light that comes softly roaring from jets set in the walls.

We were walking toward a more brightly lighted area that showed ahead of us. On the way we passed intersections where other, similar streets branched geometrically away to right and left. These were smaller than the one we were on, indicating that ours was Main Street in this bizarre submarine city.

Faces appeared at door and window openings to peer at me as we passed. And even in that jumbled moment I had time to realize that these folk could restrain curiosity better than we can atop the earth. There was no hub-bub, no running out to tag after the queerly dressed foreigner and shout humorous remarks at him.

We approached the bright spot I had noticed from afar. It was an open square, about a city block in area, in the center of which was a

royal looking building covered with blazing fragments of crystal and so brilliantly resplendent with light that it seemed to glow at the heart of a pink fire.

I was led toward this and in through a wide doorway. As courteously as though I were a visiting king, I was conducted up a great staircase, down a corridor set with more of the sparkling crystals and into a huge, low room. There my escort bowed and left me.

Still feeling that I could not possibly be awake and seeing actual things, I glanced around.

In a corner was another of the mattresslike couches made of the thick, soft hide that seemed to be the principal fabric of the place. A few feet away was a table set with dishes of food in barbaric profusion. None of the viands looked familiar but all appealed to the appetite. The floor was strewn with soft skins, and comfortable, carved benches were scattered about.

I walked to the window and looked out. Underneath was a plot of the cream colored grass through which ran a tiny stream. This widened at intervals into clear pools beside which were set stone benches. A hundred yards away was the edge of the square, where the regular, three storied houses began.

While I was staring at this unearthly vista, still unable to think with any coherence. I heard my name called. I turned to face Stanley and the Professor.

Both were pale in the rose light, and Stanley limped with the pain of his bruised leg: but both had recovered from their partial suffocation as completely as had I.

"We thought perhaps you'd decided to swim back up to the *Rosa* and leave us to our fates," said Stanley after we had stopped pumping each other's arms and had seated ourselves.

"And I thought—well, I didn't think much of anything," I replied. "I was too busy straining my eyesight over the wonders of this city. Did you ever see anything like it?"

"We haven't seen it at all, save for a view from the windows," said Stanley. "All we know of the place is that a while ago we woke up in a room like this, only much smaller and less lavish. I wonder why you rate this distinction?"

I described the streets as I had seen them. (It is impossible for me to think of them as anything but streets; it would seem as though the rock roof over all would give the appearance of a series of tunnels;

but I had always the impression of airiness and openness.)

"Light and heat are furnished by natural gas," said the Professor when I remarked on the perfection of these two necessities. "That's what makes the low roaring noise—the thousands of burning jets. But the presence of gas here isn't as unusual as the presence of air. Where does that come from? Through wandering underground mazes, from some cave mouth in the Fiji Islands to the north? That would indicate that all the earth around here is honeycombed like a gigantic section of sponge. I wonder—"

"Have you any idea how we were rescued?" I interrupted, a little impatient of his abstract scientific ponderings.

"We have," said Stanley. "A woman told us. We woke up to find her nursing us—gorgeous looking thing—finest woman I've ever seen, and I've seen a good many—"

"She didn't exactly 'tell' us," remarked the Professor with his thin smile. Women were only interesting to him as biological studies. "She drew a diagram that explained it.

"That tunnel, Martin, was like the outer diving chamber of a submarine. We were hauled in on a big windlass—driven by gas

turbines, I think. Once we were inside, a twenty-yard, counterbalanced wall of rock was lowered across the entrance. Then the water was drained out through a well, and into a subterranean body of water that extends under the entire city. And here we are."

We fell silent. Here we were. But what was going to happen to us among these friendly-seeming people; and how—if ever—we were going to get back to the earth's surface, were questions we could not even try to answer.

We ate of the appetizing food laid out on the long table. Shortly afterward we heard steps in the corridor outside the room.

A woman entered. She was ravishingly beautiful, tall, slender but symmetrically rounded. A soft leather robe slanted upward across her breast to a single shoulder fastening and ended just above her knees in a skirt arrangement. Around her head was a regal circlet of silvery gray metal with a flashing bit of crystal set in the center above her broad, low forehead.

She smiled at Stanley who looked dazzled and smiled eagerly back.

She pointed toward the door, signifying that we were to go with her. We did so; and were led down the great staircase and to a huge room

that took up half the ground floor of the building. And here we met the nobility of the little kingdom—the upper class that governed the immaculate little city.

They were standing along the walls, leaving a lane down the center of the room—tall, finely modelled men and women dressed in the single garments of soft leather. There were people there with gray hair and wisdom wrinkled faces; but all were alike in being erect of body, firm of bearing and in splendid health.

They stopped talking as we entered the big room. Our gaze strayed ahead down the lane toward the further wall.

Here was a raised dais. On it was a gleaming crystal encrusted throne. And occupying it was the most queenly, exquisitely beautiful woman I had ever dreamed about.

Woman? She was just a girl in years in spite of her grave and royal air. Her eyes were deep violet. Her hair was black as ebony and gleaming with sudden glints of light. Her skin—

But she cannot be described. Only a great painter could give a hint of her glory. Too, I might truthfully be described as prejudiced about her perfections.

The Queen, for patently she was that, bowed graciously at us. It seemed to me—though I told myself that I was an imaginative fool—that her eyes rested longest on me, and had in them an expression not granted to the Professor or Stanley.

She spoke to us a melodious sentence or two, and waved her beautiful hand in which was a short ivory wand, evidently a scepter.

"She's probably giving us the keys to the city," whispered Stanley. He edged nearer the fair one who had conducted us. "I sincerely hope there's room here for us."

The open lane closed in on us. Men and women crowded about us speaking to us and smiling ruefully as they realized we could not understand. I noticed that, for some curious reason, they seemed fascinated by the color of my hair. Red-haired men were evidently scarce there.

At length the beauty who had so captured Stanley's fancy, and who seemed to have been appointed a sort of mentor for us, suggested in sign language that we might want to return to our quarters.

It was a welcome suggestion. We were done in by the experiences and emotions that had gripped us since leaving the *Rosa* such an

incredibly few hours ago.

We went back to the second floor. I to my luxurious big apartment and Stanley and the Professor to their smaller but equally comfortable rooms.

A pleasant period slid by, every waking hour of which was filled with new experiences.

The city's name, we found, was Zyobor. It was a perfect little community. There were artisans and thinkers, artists and laborers—all alike in being physically perfect beyond belief and cultured as no race on top the ground is cultured.

As we began to learn the language, more exact details of the practical methods of existence were revealed to us.

The surrounding earth furnished them with building materials, metals and unlimited gas. The sea, so near us and yet so securely walled away, gave them food. Which warrants a more detailed description.

We were informed that the manlike, two-armed fishes were the servants of these people—domesticated animals, in a sense, only of

an extremely high order of intelligence. They were directed by mental telepathy (Every man, woman and child in Zyobor was skilled at thought projection. They conversed constantly, from end to end of the city, by mental telepathy.)

Protected in their spined shells, which they captured from the schools of porcupine fish that swarmed in Penguin Deep, they gathered sea vegetation from the higher levels and trapped sea creatures. These were brought into the subterranean chamber where our glass ball now reposed. Then the chamber was emptied of water and the food was borne to the city.

The vast army of mound-fish provided the bulk of the population's food, and also furnished the thick, pliant skin they used for clothing and drapes. They were cultivated as we cultivate cattle—an ominous herd, to be handled with care and approached by the fish-servants with due caution.

Thus, with all reasonable wants satisfied, with talent and brains to design beautiful surroundings, lighted and warmed by inexhaustible natural gas, these fortunate beings lived their sheltered lives in their rosy underground world.

At least I thought their lives were sheltered then. It was only later,

when talking to the beautiful young Queen, that I learned of the dread menace that had begun to draw near to them just a short time before we were rescued....

My first impression, when we had entered the throne room that first day, that the Queen had regarded me more intently than she had Stanley or the Professor, had been right. It pleased her to treat me as an equal, and to give me more of her time than was granted to any other person in the city.

Every day, for a growing number of hours, we were together in her apartment. She personally instructed me in the language, and such was my desire to talk to this radiant being that I made an apt pupil.

Soon I had progressed enough to converse with her—in a stilted, incorrect way—on all but the most abstract of subjects. It was a fine language. I liked it, as I liked everything else about Zyobor. The upper earth seemed far away and well forgotten.

Her name, I found, was Aga. A beautiful name....

"How did your kingdom begin?" I asked her one day, while we were sitting beside one of the small pools in the gardens. We were close together. Now and then my shoulder touched hers, and she did not

draw away.

"I know not," she replied. "It is older than any of our ancient records can say. I am the three hundred and eleventh of the present reigning line."

"And we are the first to enter thy realm from the upper world?"

"Thou art the first."

"There is no other entrance but the sea-way into which we were drawn?"

"There is no other entrance."

I was silent, trying to realize the finality of my residence here.

At the moment I didn't care much if I never got home!

"In the monarchies we know above," I said finally, avoiding her violet eyes, "it is not the custom for the queen—or king—to reign alone. A consort is chosen. Is it not so here? Has thou not, among thy nobles, some one thou hast destined—"

I stopped, feeling that if she dismissed me in anger and never spoke

to me again the punishment would be just.

But she wasn't angry. A lovely tide of color stained her cheeks. Her lips parted, and she turned her head. For a long time she said nothing. Then she faced me, with a light in her eyes that sent the blood racing in my veins.

"I have not yet chosen," she murmured. "Mayhap soon I shall tell thee why."

She rose and hurried back toward the palace. But at the door she paused—and smiled at me in a way that had nothing whatever to do with queenship.

As the time sped by the three of us settled into the routine of the city as though we had never known of anything else.

The Professor spent most of his time down by the sea chamber where the food was dragged in by the intelligent servant-fish.

He was in a zoologist's paradise. Not a creature that came in there had ever been catalogued before. He wrote reams of notes on the parchment paper used by the citizens in recording their transactions. Particularly was he interested in the vast, lowly mound-fish.

One time, when I happened to be with him, the receding waters of the chamber disclosed the body of one of the odd herdsmen of these deep sea flocks. Then the Professor's elation knew no bounds. We hurried forward to look at it.

"It is a typical fish," puzzled the Professor when we had cut the body out of its usurped armor. "Cold blooded, adapted to the chill and pressure of the deeps. There are the gills I observed before ... yet it looks very human."

It surely did. There were the jointed arms, and the rudimentary hands. Its forehead was domed; and the brain, when dissected, proved much larger than the brain of a true fish. Also its bones were not those of a mammal, but the cartilagenous bones of a fish. It was not quite six feet long; just fitted the horny shell.

"But its intelligence!" fretted the Professor, glorying in his inability to classify this marvelous specimen. "No fish could ever attain such mental development. Evolution working backward from human to reptile and then fish—or a new freak of evolution whereby a fish on a short cut toward becoming human?" He sighed and gave it up. But more reams of notes were written.

"Why do you take them?" I asked. "No one but yourself will ever see

them."

He looked at me with professorial absent-mindedness.

"I take them for the fun of it, principally. But perhaps, sometime, we may figure out a way of getting them up. My God! Wouldn't my learned brother scientists be set in an uproar!"

He bent to his observations and dissections again, cursing now and then at the distortion suffered by the specimens when they were released from the deep sea pressure and swelled and burst in the atmospheric pressure in the cave.

Stanley was engrossed in a different way. Since the moment he laid eyes on her, he had belonged to the stately woman who had first nursed him back to consciousness. Mayis was her name.

From shepherding the three of us around Zyobor and explaining its marvels to us, she had taken to exclusive tutorship of Stanley. And Stanley fairly ate it up.

"You, the notorious woman hater," I taunted him one time, "the wary bachelor—to fall at last. And for a woman of another world—almost of another planet! I'm amazed!"

"I don't know why you should be amazed," said he stiffly.

"You've been telling me ever since I was a kid that women were all useless, all alike—"

"I find I was mistaken," he interrupted. "They aren't all alike. There's only one Mayis. She is—different."

"What do you talk about all the time? You're with her constantly."

"I'm not with her any more than you're with the Queen," he shot back at me. "What do you find to talk about?"

That shut me up. He went to look for Mayis; and I wandered to the royal apartments in search of Aga.

In the first days of our friendship I had several times surprised in Aga's eyes a curious expression, one that seemed compounded of despair, horror and resignation.

I had seen that same expression in the eyes of the nobles of late, and in the faces of all the people I encountered in the streets—who, I mustn't forget to add here, never failed to treat me with a deference that was as intoxicating as it was inexplicable.

It was as though some terrible fate hovered over the populace, some dreadful doom about which nothing could be done. No one put into words any fears that might confirm that impression; but continually I got the idea that everybody there went about in a state of attempting to live normally and happily while life was still left—before some awful, wholesale death descended on them.

At last, from Aga, I learned the fateful reason.

But first—a confession that was hastened by the knowledge of the fate of the city—I learned from her something that changed all of life for me.

We were surrounded by the luxury of her private apartment. We sat on a low divan, side by side. I wanted, more than anything I had ever wanted before, to put my arms around her. But I dared not. One does not make love easily to a queen, the three hundred and eleventh of a proud line.

And then, as maids have done often in all countries, and, perhaps, on all planets, she took the initiative herself.

"We have a curious custom in Zyobor of which I have not yet told thee," she murmured. "It concerns the kings of Zyobor. The color of

their hair."

She glanced up at my own carrot-top, and then averted her gaze.

"For all of our history our kings have had—red hair. On the few occasions when the line has been reduced to a lone queen, as in my case, the red-haired men of the kingdom have striven together in public combat to determine which was most powerful and brave. The winner became the Queen's consort."

"And in this case?" I asked, my heart beginning to pound madly.

"In my case, my lord, there is to be no—no striving. When I was a child our only two red-haired males died, one by accident, one by sickness. Now there are none others but infants, none of eligible age. But—by a miracle—thou—"

She stopped; then gazed up at me from under long, gold flecked lashes.

"I was afraid ... I was doomed to die ... alone...."

It was after I had replied impetuously to this, that she told me of the terror that was about to engulf all life in the beautiful undersea city.

"Thou hast wonder, perhaps, why I should be forward enough to tell thee this instead of waiting for thine own confession first," she faltered. "Know, then—the reason is the shortness of the time we are fated to spend together. We shall belong each to the other only a little while. Then shall we belong to death! And I—when I knew the time was to be so brief—"

And I listened with growing horror to her account of the enemy that was advancing toward us with every passing moment.

About twenty miles away, in the lowest depression of Penguin Deep, lived a race of monsters which the people of Aga's city called Quabos.

The Quabos were grim beings that were more intelligent than Aga's fish-servants—even, she thought, more intelligent than humans themselves. They had existed in their dark hole, as far as the Zyobites knew, from the beginning of time.

Through the countless centuries they had constructed for themselves a vast series of dens in the rock. There they had hidden away from the deep-sea dangers. They, too, preyed on the mound-fish; but as there was plenty of food for all, the Zyobites had never paid much attention to them.

But—just before we had appeared, there had come about a subterranean quake that changed the entire complexion of matters in Penguin Deep.

The earthquake wiped out the elaborately burrowed sea tunnels of the Quabos, killing half of them at a blow and driving the rest out into the unfriendly openness of the deep.

Now this was fatal to them. They were not used to physical self defense. During the thousands of years of residence in their sheltered burrows they had become utterly unable to exist when exposed to the primeval dangers of the sea. It was as though the civilization-softened citizens of New York should suddenly be set down in a howling wilderness with nothing but their bare hands with which to contrive all the necessities of a living.

Such was the situation at the time Stanley, the Professor and myself arrived in Zyobor.

The Quabos must find an immediate haven or perish. On the ocean bottom they were threatened by the mound-fish. In the higher levels they were in danger from almost everything that swam: few things were so defenceless as themselves after their long inertia.

Their answer was Zyobor. There, in perfect security, only to be reached by the diving chamber that could be sealed at will by the twenty-yard, counterbalanced lock, the Quabos would be even more protected than in their former runways.

So—they were working day and night to invade Aga's city!

"But Aga," I interrupted impulsively at this point. "If these monsters are fishes, how could they live here in air—"

I stopped as my objection answered itself before she could reply.

They would not have to live in air to inhabit Zyobor. They would inundate the city—flood that peaceful, beautiful place with the awful pressure of the lowest depths!

That thought, in turn, suggested to me that every building in Zyobor would be swept flat if subjected suddenly to the rush of the sea. The great low cavern, without the support of the myriad walls, would probably collapse—trapping the invading Quabos and leaving the rest without a home once more.

But Aga answered this before I could voice it.

The Quabos had foreseen that point. They were tunneling slowly but

surely toward the city from a point about half a mile from the diving chamber. And as they advanced, they blocked up the passageway behind them at intervals, drilled down to the great underground sea that lay beneath all this section, and drained a little of the water away.

In this manner they lightened, bit by bit, the enormous weight of the ocean depths. When the city was finally reached, not only would it be ensured against sudden destruction but the Quabos themselves would have become accustomed to the difference in pressure. Had they gone immediately from the accustomed press of Penguin Deep into the atmosphere of Zyobor, they would have burst into bits. As it was they would be able to flood the city slowly, without injury to themselves.

"Now thou knowest our fate," concluded Aga with a shudder.

"Zyobor will be a part of the great waters. We ourselves shall be food for these monsters...." She faltered and stopped.

"But this cannot be!" I exclaimed, clenching my fists impotently.

"There *must* be something we can do; some way—"

"There is nothing to be done. Our wisest men have set themselves sleeplessly to the task of defence. There is no defence possible."

"We can't simply sit here and wait! Your people are wonderful, but this is no time for resignation. Send for my two friends, Aga. We will have a council of war, we four, and see if we can find a way!"

She shrugged despairfully, started to speak, then sent in quest of Stanley and the Professor.

They as well as myself, had had no idea of the menace that crept nearer us with each passing hour. They were dumbfounded, horrified to learn of the peril. We sat awhile in silence, realizing our situation to the full.

Then the Professor spoke:

"If only we could see what these things look like! It might help in planning to defeat them."

"That can be done with ease," said Aga. "Come."

We went with her to the gardens and approached the nearest pool.

"My fish-men are watching the Quabos constantly. They report to me by telepathy whenever I send my thoughts their way. I will let you see, on the pool, the things they are now seeing."

She stared intently at the sheet of water. And gradually, as we watched, a picture appeared—a picture that will never fade from my memory in any smallest detail.

The Quabos had huddled for protection into a large cave at the foot of the cliff outside Zyobor. There were a great many Quabos, and the cave was relatively confining. Now we saw, through the eyes of the spine protected outpost of the Queen, these monstrous refugees crowded together like sheep.

The watery cavern was a creeping mass of viscous tentacles, enormous staring eyes and globular heads. The cave was paved three deep with the horrible things, and they were attached to the its walls and roof in solid blocks.

"My God!" whispered Stanley. "There are thousands of them!"

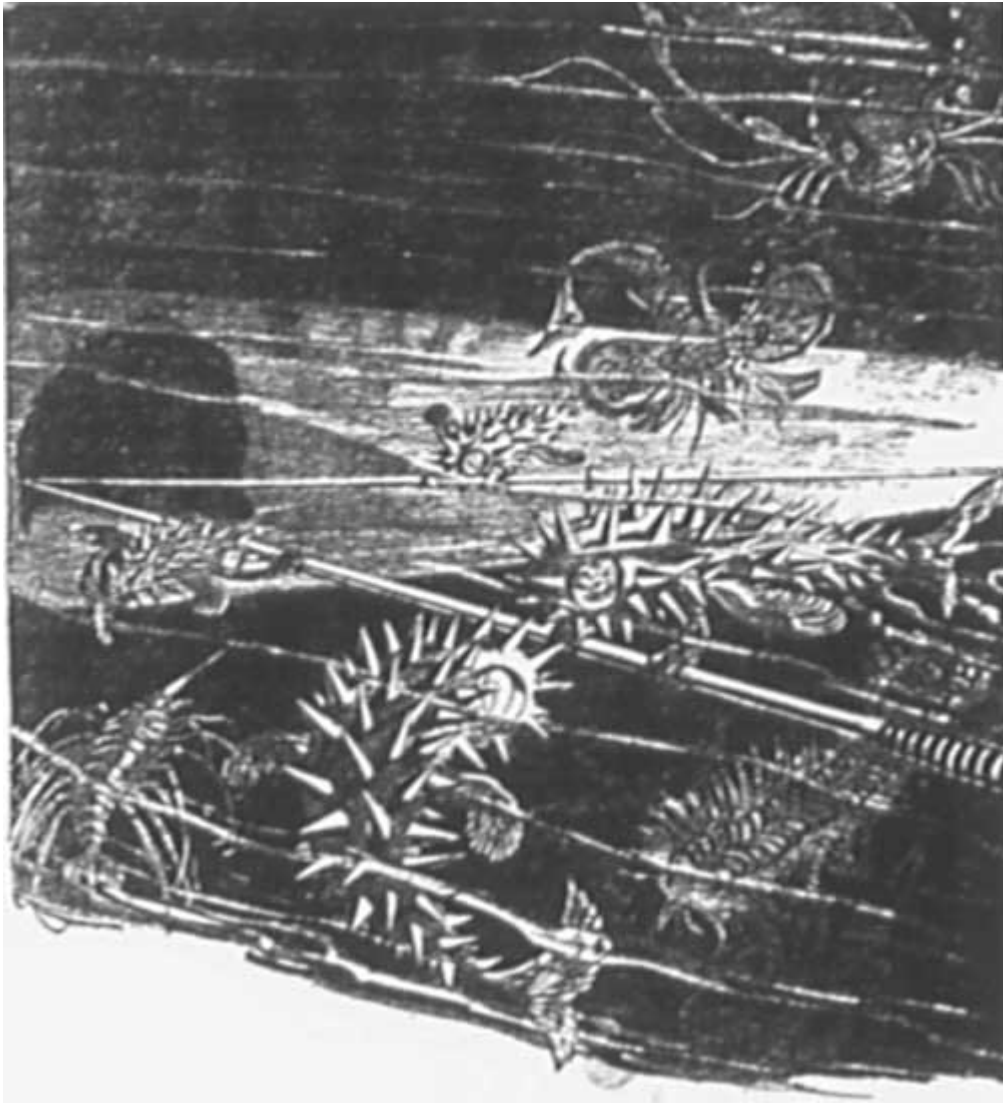
There were. And that they were in distress was evident.

The layers on the floor were weaving and shifting constantly as the bottom creatures struggled feebly to rise to the top of the mass and be relieved of the weight of their brothers. Also they were famished....

One of the blood red, gigantic worms floated near the cave entrance. Like lightning the nearest Quabos darted after it. In a moment the prey was torn to bits by the ravenous monsters.

The other side of the story was immediately portrayed to us.

With the emerging of the reckless Quabos, a sea-serpent appeared from above and snapped up three of their number. Evidently the huge serpent considered them succulent tidbits, and made it its business to wait near the cave and avail itself of just such rash chance-taking as this.



[ID: A black and white illustration showing barbed fish-guards and Quabo swimming. End ID.]

While we watched the nightmare scene, a Quabo disengaged itself from the parent mass and floated upward into the clear, giving us a chance to see more distinctly what the creatures looked like.

There was a black, shiny head as large as a sugar barrel. In this were eyes the size of dinner plates, and gleaming with a cold, hellish

intelligence. Four long, twining tentacles were attached directly to the head. Dotted along these were rudimentary sucker discs, that had evidently become atrophied by the soft living of thousands of the creature's ancestors.

As though emerging from the pool into which we were gazing, the monster darted viciously at us. At once it disappeared: the fish-servant through whose eyes we were seeing all this had evidently retreated from the approach; although, protected by its spines, it could not have been in actual danger.

"How dost thou know of the tunneling?" I asked Aga. "Thy fish-men cannot be present there, in the rear of the tunnel, to report."

"My artisans have knowledge of each forward move," she answered. "I will show thee."

We walked back to the palace and descended to a smooth-lined vault. There we saw a great stone shaft sunk down into the rock of the floor. On this was a delicate vibration recording instrument of some sort, with a needle that quivered rhythmically over several degrees of an arc.

"This tells of each move of the Quabos," said Aga. "It also tells us

where they will break through the city wall. How near to us are they, Kilor?" she asked an attendant who was studying the dial, and who had bowed respectfully to Aga and myself as we approached.

"They will break into the city in four rixas at the present rate of advance, Your Majesty."

Four rixas! In a little over sixteen days, as we count time, the city of Zyobor would be delivered into the hands—or, rather, tentacles—of the slimy, starving demons that huddled in the cavern outside!

Somberly we followed Aga back to her apartment.

As thou seest," she murmured, "there is nothing to be done. We can only resign ourselves to the fate that nears us, and enjoy as much as may be the few remaining rixas...."

She glanced at me.

The Professor's dry, cool voice cut across our wordless, engrossed communion.

"I don't think we'll give up quite as easily as all that. We can at least try to outwit our enemies. If it does nothing else for us, the effort can serve to distract our minds."

He drew from his pocket a sheet of parchment and the stub of his last remaining pencil. His fingers busied themselves apparently idly in the tracing of geometric lines.

"Looking ahead to the exact details of our destruction," he mused coolly, "we see that our most direct and ominous enemy is the sea itself. When the city is flooded, we drown—and later the Quabos can enter at will."

He drew a few more lines, and marked a cross at a point in the outer rim of the diagram.

"What will happen? The Quabos force through the last shell of the city wall. The water from their tunnel floods into Zyobor. But—and mark me well—*only* the water from the tunnel! The outer end, remember, is blocked off in their pressure-reducing process. The vast body of the sea itself cannot immediately be let in here because the Quabos must take as long a time to re-accustom themselves to its pressure as they did to work out of it."

He spread the parchment sheet before us.

"Is this a roughly accurate plan of the city?" he asked Aga.

She inclined her lovely head.

"And this," indicating the cross, "is the spot where the Quabos will break in?"

Again she nodded, shuddering.

"Then tell me what you think of this," said the Professor.

And he proceeded to sketch out a plan so simple, and yet so seemingly efficient, that the rest of us gazed at him with wordless admiration.

"My friend, my friend," whispered Aga at last, "thou hast saved us. Thou art the guardian hero of Zyobor—"

"Not too fast, Your Highness," interrupted the Professor with his frosty smile. "I shall be much surprised if this little scheme actually saves the city. We may find the rock so thick there that our task is hopeless—though I imagine the Quabos picked a thin section for help in their own plans."

A vague look came into his eyes.

"I must certainly get my hands on one of these monsters ...

superhumanly intelligent fish ... marvelous—akin to the octopus, perhaps?"

He wandered off, changed from the resourceful schemer to the dreamy man of scientific abstractions.

The Queen gazed after him with wonder in her eyes.

"A great man," she murmured, "but is he—a little mad?"

"No, only a little absent-minded," I replied. Then, "Come on, Stanley. We'll round up every able bodied citizen in Zyobor and get to work. I suppose they have some kind of rock drilling machinery here?"

They had. And they strangely resembled our own rock drills: revolving metal shafts, driven by gas turbines, tipped with fragments of the same crystal that glittered so profusely in the palace walls. Another proof that practically every basic, badly needed tool had been invented again and again, in all lands and times, as the necessity for it arose.

With hundreds of the powerful men of Zyobor working as closely together as they could without cramping each others movements,

and with the whole city resounding to the roar of the machinery, we labored at the defence that might possibly check the advance of the hideous Quabos.

And with every breath we drew, waking or sleeping, we realized that the cold blooded, inhuman invaders had crept a fraction of an inch closer in their tunneling.

The Quabos against the Zyobites! Fish against man! Two diametrically opposed species of life in a struggle to the death! Which of us would survive?

The hour of the struggle approached. Every soul in Zyobor moved in a daze, with strained face and fear haunted eyes. Their proficiency in mental telepathy was a curse to them now: every one carried constantly, transmitted from the brains of the servant-fish outposts, a thought picture of that outer cavern in the murky depths of which writhed the thousands of crowding Quabos. Each mind in Zyobor was in continual torment.

Spared that trouble, at least, Stanley and the Professor and I walked down to the fortification we had so hastily contrived. It was finished. And none too soon: the vibration indicator in the palace vault told us that only two feet of rock separated us from the burrowing monsters!

The Professor's scheme had been to cut a long slot down through the rock floor of the city to the roof of the vast, mysterious body of water below.

This slot was placed directly in front of the spot in the city wall where the Quabos were about to emerge. As they forced through the last shell of rock, the deluge of water, instead of drowning the city, was supposed to drain down the oblong vent. Any Quabos that were too near the tunnel entrance would be swept down too.

In silence we approached the edge of the great trough and stared down.

There was a stratum of black granite, fortunately only about thirty feet thick at this point, and then—the depths! A low roar reached our ears from far, far beneath us. A steady blast of ice cold air fanned up against us.

The Professor threw down a large fragment of rock. Seconds elapsed and we heard no splash. The unseen surface was too far below for the noise of the rock's fall to carry on up to us.

"The mystery of this ball of earth on which we live!" murmured the Professor. "Here is this enormous underground body of water. We

are far below sea level. Where, then, is it flowing? What does it empty into? Can it be that our planet is honeycombed with such hollows as this we are in? And is each inhabited by some form of life?"

He sighed and shook his head.

"The thought is too big! For, if that were true, wouldn't the seas be drained from the surface of the earth should an accidental passage be formed from the ocean bed down to such a giant river as this beneath us? How little we know!"

The wild clamor of an alarm bell interrupted his musing. From all the city houses poured masses of people, to form in solid lines behind the large well.

In addition to men, there were many women in those lines, tall and strong, ready to stand by their mates as long as life was left them. There were children, too, scarcely in their teens, prepared to fight for the existence of the race. Every able-bodied Zyobite was mustered against the cold-blooded Things that pressed so near.

The arms of these desperate fighters were pitiful compared to our own war weapons. With no need in the city for fighting engines,

none had ever been developed. Now the best that could be had was a sort of ax, used for dissecting the mound-fish, and various knives fashioned for peaceful purposes.

Again the bell clamored forth a warning, this time twice repeated. Every hand grasped its weapon. Every eye went hopefully to the hole in the floor on which our immediate fate depended, then valiantly to the section of wall above it.

This quivered perceptibly. A heavy, pointed instrument broke through; was withdrawn; and a hissing stream of water spurted out.

The Quabos were about to break in upon us!

With a crash that made the solid rock tremble, a section of the wall collapsed. It was the top half of the end of the Quabos' tunnel. They had so wrought that the lower half stayed in place—a thing we did not have time to recognize as significant until later.

A solid wall of water, in which writhed dozens of tentacled monsters, was upon us, and we had time for nothing but action.

The ditch had of necessity been placed directly under the Quabos' entrance. The first rush of water carried half over it. With it were

borne scores of the cold-blooded invaders.

In an instant we were standing knee deep in a torrent that tore at our footing, while we hacked frantically with knives and axes at the slimy tentacles that reached up to drag us under.

A soft, horrible mass swept against my legs. I was overthrown. A tentacle slithered around my neck and constricted viciously like a length of rotten cable. I sawed at it with the long, notched blade I carried. Choking for air, I felt the pressure relax and scrambled to my knees.

Two more tentacles went around me, one winding about my legs and the other crushing my waist. Two huge eyes glared fiendishly at me.

I plunged the knife again and again into the barrel-shaped head. It did not bleed: a few drops of thin, yellowish liquid oozed from the wounds but aside from this my slashing seemed to make no impression.

In a frenzy I defended myself against the nightmare head that was winding surely toward me. Meanwhile I devoted every energy to keeping on my feet. If I ever went under again—

It seemed to me that the creature was weakening. With redoubled fury I hacked at the spidery shape. And gradually, when it seemed as though I could not withstand its weight and crushing tentacles another second, it slipped away and floated off on the shallow, roaring rapids.

For a moment I stood there, catching my breath and regaining my strength. Shifting, terrible scenes flashed before my eyes.

A tall Zyobite and an almost equally stalwart woman were both caught by one gigantic Quabo which had a tentacle around the throat of each. The man and woman were chopping at the viscous, gruesome head. One of the Thing's eyes was gashed across, giving it a fearsome, blind appearance. It heaved convulsively, and the three struggling figures toppled into the water and were swirled away.

The Professor was almost buried by a Quabo that had all four of its tentacles wound about him. As methodically as though he were in a laboratory dissecting room, he was cutting the slippery lengths away, one by one, till the fourth parted and left him free.

A giant Zyobite was struggling with two of the monsters. He had an ax in each hand, and was whirling them with such strength and rapidity that they formed flashing circles of light over his head. But

he was torn down at last and borne off by the almost undiminished flood that gushed from the tunnel.

And now, without warning, a heavy soft body flung against my back, and the accident most to be dreaded in that mêlée occurred.

I was knocked off my feet! My head was pressed under the water. On my chest was a mass that was yielding but immovable, soft but terribly strong. Animated, firm jelly! I had no chance to use my knife. My arms were held powerless against my sides.

Water filled my nose and mouth. I strangled for breath, heaving at the implacable weight that pinned me helpless. Bright spots swirled before my eyes. There was a roaring in my ears. My lungs felt as though filled with molten lead. I was drowning....

Vaguely I felt the pressure loosen at last. An arm—with good, solid flesh and bone in it—slipped under my shoulders and dragged me up into the air.

"Don't you know—can't drown a fish—holding it under water?" panted a voice.

I opened my eyes and saw Stanley, his face pale with the thrill of

battle, his chin jutting forward in a berserk line, his eyes snapping with eager, wary fires.

I grinned up at him and he slapped me on the back—almost completing the choking process started by the salt water I'd inhaled.

"That's better. Now—at it again!"

I don't remember the rest of the tumult. The air seemed filled with loathsome tentacles and bright metal blades. It was a confused eternity until the decreased volume of water in the tunnel gave us a respite....

As the tunnel slowly emptied the pressure dropped, and the incoming flood poured squarely into the trough instead of half over it. From that moment there was very little more for us to do.

Our little army—with about a fourth of its number gone—had only to guard the ditch and see that none of the Quabos caught the edges as they hurtled out of their passage.

For perhaps ten minutes longer the water poured from the break in the wall, with now and then a doomed Quabo that goggled horribly at us as it was dashed down the hole in the floor to whatever

awesome depths were beneath.

Then the flow ceased. The last oleaginous corpse was pushed over the edge. And the city, save for an ankle-deep sheet of water that was rapidly draining out the vents in the streets, presented its former appearance.

The Zyobites leaned wearily against convenient walls and began telling themselves how fortunate they were to have been spared what seemed certain destruction.

The Professor didn't share in the general feeling of triumph.

"Don't be so childishly optimistic!" he snapped as I began to congratulate him on the victory his ditch had given us. "Our troubles aren't over yet!"

"But we've proved that we can stand up to them in a hand-to-tentacle fight—"

His thin, frosty smile appeared.

"One of those devils, normally, is stronger than any three men. The only reason all of us weren't destroyed at once is that they were slowly suffocating as they fought. The foot and a half of water we

were in wasn't enough to let their gills function properly. Now if they were able to stand right up to us and not be handicapped by lack of water to breathe ... I wonder.... Is that part of their plan? Is there any way they could manage ...?"

"But, Professor," I argued, "it's all over, isn't it? The tunnel is emptied, and all the Quabos are—"

"The tunnel isn't emptied. It's only *half* emptied! I'll show you."

He called Stanley; and the three of us went to the break.

"See," the Professor pointed out to us as we approached the jagged hole, "the Quabos only drilled through the top half of their tunnel ending. That means that the tunnel still has about four feet of water in it—enough to accommodate a great many of the monsters. There may be four or five hundred of them left in there; possibly more. We can expect renewed hostilities at any time!"

"But won't it be just a repetition of the first battle?" remonstrated Stanley. "In the end they'll be killed or will drown for lack of water as these first ones did."

The Professor shook his head.

"They're too clever to do that twice. The very fact that they kept half their number in reserve shows that they have some new trick to try. Otherwise they'd all have come at once in one supreme effort."

He paced back and forth.

"They're ingenious, intelligent. They're fighting for their very existence. They must have figured out some way of breathing in air, some way of attacking us on a more even basis in case that first rush went wrong. What can it be?"

"I think you're borrowing trouble before it is necessary—" I began, smiling at his elaborate, scientific pessimism. But I was interrupted by a startled shout from Stanley.

"Professor Martin," he cried, pointing to the tunnel mouth. "Look!"

Like twin snakes crawling up to sun themselves, two tentacles had appeared over the rock rim. They hooked over the edge; and leisurely, with grim surety of invulnerability, the barrel-like head of a Quabo balanced itself on the ledge and glared at us.

For a moment we stared, paralyzed, at the Thing. And, during that moment it squatted there, as undistressed as though the air were its

natural element, its gills flapping slowly up and down supplying it with oxygen.

The thing that held us rooted to the spot with fearful amazement was the fantastic device that permitted it to be almost as much at home in air as in water.

Over the great, globular head was set an oval glass shell. This was filled with water. A flexible metal tube hung down from the rear. Evidently it carried a constant stream of fresh water. As we gazed we saw intermittent trickles emerging from the bottom of the crystalline case.

Point for point the creature's equipment was the same as diving equipment used by men, only it was exactly opposite in function. A helmet that enabled a fish to breathe in air, instead of a helmet to allow a man to breathe in water!

Stanley was the first of us to recover from the shock of this spectacle. He faced about and raised his voice in shouts of warning to the resting Zyobites. For other glass encased monsters had appeared beside the first, now.

One by one, in single file like a line of enormous marching insects,

they crawled down the wall and humped along on their tentacles—around the ditch and toward us!

The deadly infallibility of that second attack!

The Quabos advanced on us like armored tanks bearing down on defenceless savages. Their glass helmets, in addition to containing water for their breathing, protected them from our knives and axes. We were utterly helpless against them.

They marched in ranks about twenty yards apart, each rank helping the one in front to carry the cumbersome water-hoses which trailed back to the central water supply in the tunnel.

Their movements were slow, weighted down as they were by the great glass helmets, but they were appallingly sure.

We could not even retard their advance, let alone stop it. Here were no suffocating, faltering creatures. Here were beings possessed of their full vigor, each one equal to three of us even as the Professor had conjectured. Their only weak points were their tentacles which trailed outside the glass cases. But these they kept coiled close, so that to reach them and hack at them we had to step within range of their terrific clutches.

The Zyobites fought with the valor of despair added to their inherent noble bravery. Man after man closed with the monstrous, armored Things—only to be seized and crushed by the weaving tentacles.

Occasionally a terrific blow with an ax would crack one of the glass helmets. Then the denuded Quabo would flounder convulsively in the air till it drowned. But there were all too few of these individual victories. The main body of the Quabos, rank on rank, dragging their water-hose behind them, came on with the steadiness of a machine.

Slowly we were driven back down the broad street and toward the palace. As we retreated, old people and children came from the houses and went with us, leaving their dwellings to the mercy of the monsters.

A block from the palace we bunched together and, by sheer mass and ferocity, actually stopped the machinelike advance for a few moments. Miscellaneous weapons had been brought from the houses—sledges, stone benches, anything that might break the Quabos' helmets—and handed to us in silence by the noncombatants.

Somebody tugged at my sleeve. Looking down I saw a little girl. She had dragged a heavy metal bar out to the fray and was trying to get some fighter's attention and give it to him.

I seized the formidable weapon and jumped at the nearest Quabo, a ten-foot giant whose eyes were glinting gigantically at me through the distorting curve of the glass.

Disregarding the clutching tentacles entirely, I swung the bar against the helmet. It cracked. I swung again and it fell in fragments, spilling the gallons of water it had contained.

The tentacles wound vengefully around me, but in a few seconds they relaxed as the thing gasped out its life in the air.

I turned to repeat the process on another if I could, and found myself facing the Queen. Her head was held bravely high, though the violet of her eyes had gone almost black with fear and repulsion of the terrible things we fought.

"Aga!" I cried. "Why art thou here! Go back to the palace at once!"

"I came to fight beside thee," she answered composedly, though her delicate lips quivered. "All is lost, it seems. So shall I die beside thee."

I started to reply, to urge her again to seek the safety of the palace. But by now the deadly advance of the tentacled demons had begun

once more.

Fighting vainly, the population of Zyobor was swept into the palace grounds, then into the building itself.

Men, women and children huddled shoulder to shoulder in the cramping quarters. An ironic picture came to me of the crowding masses of Quabos stuffed into the protection of the outer cave, waiting the outcome of the fight being waged by their warriors. Here were we in a similar circumstance, waiting for the battle to be decided. Though there was little doubt in the minds of any of us as to what the outcome would be.

Guards, the strongest men of the city, were stationed with sledges at the doors and windows. The Quabos, able only to enter one at a time, halted a moment and there was a badly needed breathing spell.

"We've got to find some drastic means of defence," said the Professor, "or we won't last another three hours."

"If you asked me, I'd say we couldn't last another three hours anyway," replied Stanley with a shrug. "These fish have out-thought us!"

"Nonsense! There may still be a way—"

"A brace of machine-guns...." I murmured hopefully.

"You might as well wish for a dozen light cannon!" snapped the Professor. "Please try to concentrate, and see if any effective weapon suggests itself to you—something more available at the moment than machine-guns."

In silence the three of us racked our brains for a means of defence. Aga, leaving for a time the task of soothing her more hysterical subjects, came quietly over to us and sat on the bench beside me.

Frankly I could think of nothing. To my mind we were surely doomed. What arms could possibly be contrived at such short notice? What weapon could be called forth to be effective against the thick glass helmets?

But as I glanced at Stanley I saw his face set in a new expression as his thoughts took a turn that suggested possible salvation.

"Glass," he muttered. "Glass. What destroys it? Sharp blows ... certain acids ... variation in temperature ... heat and cold.... That's it! *That's it!*"

He turned excitedly to the Queen.

"I think we have it! At least it's worth trying. If there is any tubing around...." He stopped as he realized he was talking in English, and resumed stiltedly in Aga's own language.

"Hast thou, in the palace, any lengths of pipe like to that which the Quabos drag behind them?"

"No ..." Aga began, her eyes round and wondering. Then she interrupted herself. "Ah, yes! There is! In a vault near that of Kilor's there is a great spool of it. He had it fashioned to carry air for one of his experiments—"

"Come along!" cried Stanley. "I'll explain what I have in mind while we dig up this coil of hose."

A score of Zyobite workmen were gathered at once. The length of hose—made of some linen-like fabric of tough, shredded sea-weed and covered with a flexible metal sheath—was cut into three pieces each about fifty yards long. These were connected to three of the largest gas vents of the palace.

Stanley, the Professor and I each took an end. And we prepared to

fight, with fire, the creatures of water.

"It ought to work," Stanley, repeated several times as though trying to reassure himself as well as us. "It's simple enough: the water in those helmets is ice cold: if fire is suddenly squirted against them they'll crack with the uneven expansion."

"Unless," retorted the Professor, "their glass has some special heat and cold resisting quality."

Stanley shrugged.

"It may well have some such properties. How such creatures can make glass at all is beyond me!"

Dragging our hose to the big front entrance of the palace, and warning the crowded people to keep their feet clear of it, we prepared to test out the efficiency of this, our last resource against the enemy.

For an instant we paused just inside the doorway, looking out at the ugly, glassed-in Things that were massing to attack us again.

The ranks of Quabos had closed in now, till they extended down the street for several hundred yards in close formation—a forest of great

pulpy heads with huge eyes that glared unblinkingly at the glittering, pink building that was their objective.

"Light up!" ordered Stanley, setting an example by touching his hose nozzle to the nearest wall jet. A spurt of fire belched from his hose, streaming out for four or five feet in a solid red cone. The Professor and I touched off our torches; and we moved slowly out the door toward the ranks of Quabos.

"Don't try to save yourselves from their tentacles," advised Stanley. "Walk right up to them, direct the fire against their helmets, and damn the consequences. If they grip too hard you can always play the torch on their tentacles till they think better of it."

The Quabos' front line humped grimly toward us, unblinking eyes glaring, tentacles writhing warily, little spurts of used water trickling from their helmets.

"Keep together," warned Stanley, "so that if any one of us loses his light he can get it from the hose of one of the other two. And—*Here they come!*"

There was no more time for commands. The Quabos in front, supplied with slack in their hoses by those behind, leaped at us with

incredible agility. We fell back a step so that none should get at our backs.

The last stand was begun.

It was not a battle so much as a series of fierce duels. The Quabos realized their new danger instantly, and devoted all their efforts to extinguishing our torches. We parried and thrust with the flaming hoses in an equally desperate effort to prevent it.

One of them scuttled toward me like a great crab. A tentacle darted toward my right arm. Another was pressed against the nozzle. There was a sickening smell—and the tentacle was jerked spasmodically away.

I caught the hose in my left hand and turned the fiery jet against the water-filled helmet.

A shout of savage exultation broke from my lips. Hardly, had the flame touched the glass before it cracked! There was a report like a pistol shot—and a miniature Niagara of water and splintered glass poured at my feet!

The tentacle around my arm tightened, then relaxed. The monster

shuddered in a convulsive heap on the ground.

I went toward the next one, swinging the flaring hose in a slow arc as I advanced. The creature lunged at me and threshed at the burning jet with all four of its feelers. But it had been exposed to the air for a long time now. The ghastly tentacles were dry; withered and soft. A touch of the fire seared them unmercifully.

Nevertheless with a swift move it slapped a tentacle squarely down over the hose nozzle. The flame was extinguished as the flame of a candle is pinched out between thumb and forefinger. I retreated.

"Catch!" came a voice behind me.

The Professor swung his four-foot jet my way. I held my hose to it, and the flame burst out again. A touch at my grisly antagonist's helmet—a sharp crack—the welcome rush of water over the cream-colored grass—and another monster was writhing in the death throes!

Keeping close together, the three of us faced the massed Quabos in the palace grounds. Again and again the fiery weapon of one or the other of us was dashed out—to be re-lighted from the nearest hose. Again and again loud detonations heralded the collapse of more of

the invaders.

But it seemed as though their flailing tentacles were as myriad as the stars they had never seen. It seemed as though their numbers would never appreciably diminish. We thrust and parried till our arms grew numb. And still there appeared to be hundreds of the Quabos left.

By order of the Queen three stout Zyobites stepped up to us and relieved us of our exhausting labor. Gladly we handed the hoses to them and went to the palace for a much needed rest.

Two more shifts of fighters took the flaming jets before the monsters began the retreat slowly back toward their tunnel. And here the Professor took command again.

"We mustn't let them get away to try some new scheme!" he snapped. "Martin, take fifty men and beat them back to the break in the wall. Go around a side street. They move so slowly that you can easily cut off their retreat."

"There isn't any more hose—" began Stanley.

"There's plenty of it. The Quabos brought it with them." The Professor turned to me again. "Take metal-saws with you. Cut

sections of the Quabos water-hose and connect them to the nearest wall jets. Run!"

I ran, with fifty of the men of Zyobor close behind me. We dodged out the side of the palace grounds least guarded by the Quabos, ducking between their ranks like infantry men threading through an opposition of powerful but slow-moving tanks. Four of our number were caught, but the rest got through unscathed.

Down a side street we raced, and along a parallel avenue toward the tunnel. As we went I prayed that all the Quabos had centered their attention on the palace and left their vulnerable water-hoses unguarded.

They had! When we stole up the last block toward the break we found the nearest Quabo was a hundred yards down the street—and working further away with every move.

At once we set to work on the scores of hoses that quivered over the floor with each move of the distant monsters.

A Zyobite with the muscles of a Hercules swung his ax mightily down on a hose. The metal was soft enough to be sheered through by

the stroke. The cut ends were smashed so that they could not be crammed down over the tapering jets; but we could use our metal-saws for cleaner severances at the other ends.

The giant with the ax stepped from hose to hose. Lengths were completed with the saws. A man was placed at each jet to hold the connections in position. Before the Quabos had reached us we had rigged six fire-hoses and had cut through forty or fifty more water-lines.

The end was certain and not long in coming.

We sprayed the monsters with fire as workmen spray fruit trees with insect poison. Stanley, the Professor and a Zyobite came up in the rear with their three hoses.

Caught between the two forces, the beaten fish milled in hopeless confusion and indecision.

In half an hour they were all reduced to huddles of slimy wet flesh that dotted the pavement from the break back to the palace grounds. The invaders were completely annihilated—and the city of Zyobor was saved!

"Now," said the Professor triumphantly, "we have only to knock out the bottom half of the tunnel wall, empty the tunnel and make sure there are no more Quabos lurking there. After that we can fill it in with solid cement. The Queen can order her fish-servants to guard the outer cave and see that no food gets in to the starving monsters there. The war is over, gentlemen. The Quabos are as good as exterminated at this moment. And I can get back to my zoological work...."

Stanley and I looked at each other. We knew each others thoughts well enough.

He could resume his companionship with the beautiful Mayis. And I—I had Aga....

With the menace of the Quabos banished forever, the city of Zyobor resumed its normal way.

The citizens lowered their dead into the great well we had cut, with appropriate rites performed by the Queen. The daily tasks and pleasures were picked up where they had been dropped. The haunting fear died from the eyes of the people.

Shortly afterward, with great ceremony and celebration, I was made

King of Zyobor, to rule by Aga's side. Stanley took Mayis for his wife. He is second to me in power. The Professor is the official wise man of the city.

Life flows smoothly for us in this pink lighted community. We are more than content with our lot here. Our only concern has been the grief that must have been occasioned our relatives and friends when the *Rosa* sailed home without us.

Now we have thought of a way in which, with luck, we may communicate with the upper world. By relays of my Queen's fish-servants we believe we can send up the Professor's invaluable notes[A] and this informal account of what has happened since we left San Francisco that....

(Editor's note: There was no trace of any "notes." The yacht, *Rosa*, was reported lost with all hands in a hurricane off New Zealand. Aboard her were a Professor George Berry and the owner, Stanley Browne. There is no record, however, of any passenger by the name of Martin Grey. To date no one has taken this document seriously enough to consider financing an expedition of investigation to Penguin Deep.)